

# Planning processes for Chicago's 606 Trail spawned gentrification, study finds

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When nonprofit organizations coordinate large green infrastructure projects such as Chicago's 606 Trail, the likelihood of gentrification occurring significantly increases, University of Illinois recreation, sport and tourism professor Alessandro Rigolon reports in a new case study. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

When nonprofit groups coordinate large green infrastructure projects

such as Chicago's 606 Trail, the risks of gentrification multiply significantly due to the fragmentation that occurs among nonprofits, government agencies and housing organizations, according to a new case study of the trail.

In a paper published in the journal *Cities*, Alessandro Rigolon, a professor of recreation, sport and tourism at the University of Illinois, and University of Colorado urban and regional planning professor Jeremy Nemeth examined the planning processes associated with the 606 Trail and conclude that these processes may have made gentrification the most likely outcome.

Heralded as a cornerstone of Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel's sustainability plan, the \$95 million project converted an abandoned rail line into a multiuse path and series of open green spaces that connect four diverse neighborhoods on Chicago's northwest side: Bucktown, Humboldt Park, Logan Square and Wicker Park.

The environmental nonprofit The Trust for Public Land was the lead private partner for the 606 Trail, which opened to the public in June 2015, according to the study.

While relying on park nonprofits to coordinate such projects is popular in the U.S. and other countries, offering real benefits in terms of efficiency, fundraising and [community engagement](#), the researchers suggest that delegating management of these projects to these groups increases the likelihood of environmental gentrification by drawing attention away from displacement concerns.

Rigolon and Nemeth reviewed planning documents for the 606 Trail and interviewed 16 people who were involved in the planning process, including representatives of nonprofit organizations and city officials.

"A key finding from our interviews is that putting a nonprofit agency that is 'not in the business of housing' in charge of a redevelopment project ultimately created a situation wherein connections between park development and [affordable housing](#) were further fissured, and park planning and public health concerns took precedence over the gentrification concerns raised by many neighborhood advocates and local residents," Rigolon said.

Emmanuel recognized early on that "sustainability sells" and that new parks are revenue generators, attracting investors, increasing property tax revenues and creating jobs, according to the study.

"It is important to note that the 606 was intended to address real, documented needs and deficiencies in park access and active transportation routes, and that several community organizers we interviewed felt that the mayor's office co-opted these environmental justice efforts to deliver on his campaign promise to complete this signature project during his first term," the researchers wrote.

In the case of the 606 Trail, the green growth machine—which are coalitions of developers and elected officials that use sustainability to drive economic development—used the popularity and the apolitical nature of sustainability and the trail's potential public health benefits to accelerate the planning process and push the project through with little resistance, Rigolon said.

Although many residents of the park-poor neighborhoods near the trail supported the project initially, less than a year after it opened hundreds of demonstrators marched along it in protest of rent and property value increases.

In analyzing census data for the period 2010-2016, Rigolon and Nemeth found that the median monthly rent on tracts bordering the trail

increased by \$201, nearly double the average increase of \$102 for the city of Chicago.

During that time period, tracts bordering the trail also experienced an influx of non-Hispanic whites, with this racial/ethnic group increasing by 4.83 percent on these properties compared with an increase of 0.56 percent citywide.

Accordingly, Rigolon and Nemeth found that the median household income of people living on tracts bordering the trail jumped by \$14,682, compared with an average citywide increase of \$3,557 during the same time period.

"These quantitative analyses corroborated claims by several interviewees that although neighborhoods along the 606 had started to see gentrification in the 2000s, the [trail](#)'s construction served to accelerate these trends, particularly in close proximity to the [project](#) itself," Rigolon and Nemeth wrote.

However, when affordable housing advocates raised concerns, the Trust for Public Land had neither the expertise or the authority to address them, a representative of the group told the researchers.

Likewise, a city official told them that municipal departments—with their disparate mandates, funding sources and expertise—had no centralized mechanism for responding either, which resulted in failure "to connect the dots between critical environmental, health and affordability challenges."

The researchers suggest that emerging coalitions of housing and environmental nonprofits such as the Los Angeles Regional Open Space and Affordable Housing Collective provide a promising way forward to address environmental gentrification concerns proactively.

**More information:** Alessandro Rigolon et al, "We're not in the business of housing:" Environmental gentrification and the nonprofitization of green infrastructure projects, *Cities* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.cities.2018.03.016](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2018.03.016)

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